What is autonomy and why is it important?

Autonomy refers to thinking for oneself in uncertain and complex situations in which judgment is more important than routine. For teachers, the nature of their work and its social context complicates this definition. Teaching involves placing one’s autonomy at the service of the best interests of children. (Pitt & Phelan, 2008)

Teacher autonomy vacillates between being portrayed as a mark of a robust professionalism and as a sign of the difficulty other educational stakeholders have in influencing or believing they have influenced what teachers do behind classroom doors (Labaree 1992). Whether cast as earned or stolen, bestowed by professional membership or diminished by external forces, autonomy is generally perceived as a quantifiable characteristic of an individual (Fournier, 1999). As such autonomy is equated with freedom to act in accordance with one’s personal beliefs and, most dangerously, in one’s own interest (Pitt & Phelan, 2005). Freedom of will and self-interest are potentially entangled in a dangerous fantasy of sovereignty according to which perfect liberty is incompatible with the existence of others. (Phelan, 2008, p. 5)

Pitt and Phelan’s definition and exploration of autonomy is important because it encourages thinking which recognizes uncertainty and complexity in both defining and exploring the concept and context of autonomy. Their research also signals that autonomy is a hotly-contested issue. Autonomy is a difficult concept to grasp precisely, because judgment in terms of human interactions is not precisely or easily defined, nor is it universally agreed which judgments are appropriate in a range of situations. But Pitt and Phelan, like most academic writing on the issue of autonomy, explore the issue in various ways: conceptually and philosophically; historically; contextually; politically; and by conducting research which focuses on the work and perceptions of teachers.

Data from the BCTF Worklife of BC teachers study (2009)¹ found that, for many teachers, satisfaction comes from having autonomy, while respondents also clearly understood some limits to such autonomy.

I can teach what I want, how I want, within the curriculum guidelines.

Some respondents either expressly referenced autonomy or spoke of the freedom they had to teach in the way they wanted. Their capacity to make choices in terms of pedagogical approaches

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and in curriculum within the boundaries of the provincial curriculum documents clearly provided considerable satisfaction:

I have freedom to teach...with a great deal of autonomy in regard to subject and curriculum focus, lots of freedom in how to deliver, what to deliver within the curriculum, how to support students in need.

I greatly enjoy the variety of the work I do; working with principals, vice principals, teachers, students, parents, agencies….I have a lot of autonomy. I am glad that the work I do is with people, helping students and families. This is very satisfying.

Autonomy was not defined by any respondent, yet teachers’ comments provide a sense that there is a commonality of meaning: to have some space to make decisions, to do the job in a way defined by the individual rather than by an employer or administrator, to have the flexibility to change and adapt as necessary. The value placed on autonomy by teachers appears to be identified along with values placed on community and relationships, suggesting that many teachers thrive in a combination of autonomous decision-making within a supportive community.

Reducing teachers’ autonomy further, as BCPSEA clearly wants to do, will erode the status of teaching as a profession, thereby making it less attractive to those who want a professional career which offers significant autonomy to its members. Eroding the status of teachers is hardly likely to improve student achievement, as any cursory glance over several jurisdictions will show. It may also damage teacher recruitment and retention, and some authors have linked reduced autonomy with teachers leaving the profession. Warfield et al argued:

When teachers do not believe that they have the authority to make decisions about their teaching they become frustrated and may eventually leave teaching. (p. 454)

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References